What Cannot Be Fixed

By: Aubretia Lycania

Splinter’s leaving his sons for Japan, and the turtles’ family ties are being redrawn. It’s time for Raphael to learn control, for Michelangelo to take control, and for Leonardo and Donatello to deal with what they can't control...including their brothers

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Prologue: Details of a Life

By Aubretia Lycania

Description: Splinter's leaving his sons for Japan with a reminder of his imminent mortality, and the turtles' family ties are being redrawn. It's time for Raphael to learn control, for Michelangelo to take control, and for Leonardo and Donatello to deal with what they can't control —including their brothers.

Author's Note: Those of you who recognize me know I frequent familial stories over in the overpopulated Harry Potter fanfic sites on the internet. However, I am making a jump to TMNT because I've watched it (and have been formulating stories about it) since before I can remember seeing the first episode. I am now twenty years old, and the Turtles have been "growing" with me (interesting how they stay the same bloody age, though), and, given my experience with my seven sisters (four younger, three older… oi vey), I am writing this as a way of expanding upon their familial experience without the action that normally accompanies them. Yes, there will be fighting. No, it will not be between Raphael and Leonardo, love it as we all do. It is set soon after the new TMNT movie, perhaps a month later, after the thrill of victory has worn off. Please enjoy, and I invite all feedback and criticism, as always.

Disclaimer: Umm… If I owned the turtles, I would have had to invent them in 1984, which was two years before my birth. So… I'm thinking I don't own them. Just a hunch. I just borrow them, because they're like having big brothers. Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman rock, by the way.

What Cannot Be Fixed

Leonardo found renewed life with his brothers to be something like picking up a book he hadn't read in years, and hearing a child interpret it for him. Once upon a time he had known the book to its

infinitesimal syllable, to every preposition—and he'd taken it for granted. The flow, the words, the order of events, had been a reality that passed and happened without his needing to concentrate. Now, a new voice had control of that life, changing the rhythm, placing emphasis where none had been before, forgetting words he realized that he'd always assumed were there, adding in and adlibbing, vociferating and altering, transforming and mutating, all that had once been so very normal to him.

Donatello leading with his shoulders in combat training, always losing balance over Mikey's chucks; the sound of his keyboards, sonar beeps in the middle of the night, drip-drippings from the chem set, Coke cans full of screws and nuts and bolts and potato chips. His fastidiousness over the state of his screens but a shrugged uncaring in the kitchen, a supped-up version of '80s pong on the monitor behind him when he fell asleep in front of his surveillance gear—the way Donnie would wake up immediately if anyone tried to turn it off.

Michelangelo gamely stuffing two Hostess cupcakes in his mouth at a time every morning in an attempt to make Raphael smile—and sometimes succeeding. The way he pretended to slip on the frosting spill in the corner of the kitchen at least twice a week; the competition they all had, unspoken, over who would at last give in and mop it up before the cockroaches got there. The way Mikey yelled unrestrainedly at the Mortal Kombat arcade console when the button stuck and he couldn't do his favorite final moves; the sound of his snoring underneath an X-Men comic book on the couch; the hole in his favorite sofa cushion which kept mysteriously enlarging; his poster of Vanna White with nunchaku drawn into her hands, ostentatiously autographed "THE MIKESTER"—and the two darts Raph and Donnie had thrown at either hand, to simulate Mikey trapping her in the picture. The piece of pizza stuck to the ceiling fan with a shuriken.

Raphael's sudden disconcerting silences, the sound of his fists, muffled, pounding repeatedly into the often duck-tapped punching

bag in the training room at three in the morning. A small smile, looking down, then suddenly crushing a Cactus Cooler can over his head, to Mikey's uproarious applause. Playing pizza football with Donnie, catching a slice of pepperoni and marshmallow on his sai after a back flip off the top bunk. Polishing the shell cycle up in the warehouse lovingly, in the same meditative way Leonardo found himself polishing his swords, lopping motor oil at Casey or Donnie when they made some crack about his unhealthy obsession with the bike. The strange dilation of his eyes during training, his labored breathing, as though his heart were being crushed, as he lost focus and dove headlong into battle haze, until someone knew enough to throw him into a wall and bring him back to earth. The gouges in his shell, the spider's web crack in the center, like the fracturing of a mirror.

Doritos in the beds, plastic snakes in the fridge and in Leonardo's sheets, gummy bugs hanging from the ceiling, the old Pepsi and cheese stains in the den, different sleeping and non-sleeping sounds, Master Splinter's soap operas during the day and sci-fi monster killer-thriller-chiller movies all night. Donnie's stuffed Godzilla doll he used to drag around when they were about seven appearing in strange places, Mikey's Panda bear he still slept with, a dusty Wolverine figure standing in for innumerable memories above Raphael's bed.

These fragmented details made up the stuff of Leonardo's existence, and yet now they appeared strange, suddenly unreal beside the wider world of Central America, Spanish-speaking thugs, the smell of potatoes and chilis, thrum of the jungle confused with the rumble above, red-eyes and the subway. A month had passed since they'd defeated Winter's brothers and closed his portal, a month since that sense of victory, dignity, and purpose that made all their petty fights evaporate. But the petty fights, the squabbles over Sonic the Hedgehog, combat simulations gone awry, the struggle and daily work, were the core of their existence, save the odd fight to save a lady's purse or stop a robbery-in-progress. The petty fights that evaporate, like water on pavement, precipitate down once more,

flooding the sewers. Their sense of purpose felt washed away with it, sometimes, in the middle of training, or the middle of the night, or in the middle of… their life.

And in the middle of all those details Leonardo had once taken for granted arose new details: Mikey, half-dressed as Cowabunga Carl, slumping into the den and crash-landing on the couch, exhausted from children beating him over the head like a turtle piñata, and complaining about over-demanding uptown mothers who planned parties to within an inch of his life. Donnie's exasperated voice from his alcove, trying to calm people over the IT tech support hotline, and once in a while chuckling as he taped particularly retarded callers for the edification of his brothers later than evening. A few hours of gratifying calm as Raphael returned, tired but contented, from the warehouse where he and Casey repaired bikes, mopeds, and ATVs for a small clientele, covered in axle grease but looking tempered and somewhat accomplished, happy to take calls for Mikey and write down the night's pizza orders. Leonardo found himself doing odd jobs for all three of them in between his training—looking up new viruses for Donnie while he was on the line with someone who had some nasty malware, helping Mikey practice his balloon animals or bubble formations, repairing extensive damage on urgently-needed motorcycles with Raph late into the night, after Casey had taken to the streets in his hockey mask.

With Donatello and Michelangelo, things were much as they'd always been; Leo could confide his problems and find empathy in Donnie; he could tease and be teased by Mikey as he had his entire life. But he found a sudden and very new negotiating of boundaries between himself and Raphael, suggestive that Raph was attempting to forge some figment of an adult relationship with him—to go from rival brothers to something like friends. After sixteen years they'd finally almost killed each other, and both knew, but never said, that things could only get better after that—or they'd both die.

Compromising

"Hey, Leo."

Leonardo looked up from the carburetor he'd been cleaning and through the tire at Raphael, who was attempting to pass him a slightly damp rag.

"You gotta get everything outta there. This guy said he left the thing out in the rain—I'm bettin' it won't start 'cause there's water in the works." Raph chuckled. "If it got in the engine we're eatin' supremes for a *month* ."

"Hey, don't be too happy about it, Raph—I can't help you every night, you know," Leo commented, unable to conceal a smile. It was nice to know Raph actually wanted him up here, if nothing else.

Raphael reached around the front wheel and lightly punched his shoulder. "What, you got a hot date or somethin'? Come on."

Leonardo laughed, then grew serious. "Um—you notice Master Splinter's been acting a little weird lately?"

"No, I got one better on ya—I noticed him packin' bags last night, when I was comin' in after puttin' the new steering shaft on the Tomos over there—you know, the one you *ditched* me on, bro."

Leo looked up so fast he hit his head on the right handlebar. "Seriously? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Figured he'd tell you," Raph shrugged. "You'd be the one in charge if he left. I thought you were keepin' it from the rest of us."

"I wouldn't do that," Leo said, very dignified.

"Yeah you would, ya kiss-up," Raph rebounded, smiling. "I swear, Leo, you got your head so far up Master Splinter's butt sometimes

we're gonna hafta come up with a new mutant species for the two of you."

"What! Shut up, Raph!" Leo almost choked, realizing he'd been goaded into sounding like he was twelve again. He groaned. "Man, I can't believe it's almost eight already. Mikey's coming in from his gig over on 11th soon—we'd better get downstairs for dinner."

"Right—just let me finish installin' the brake, then we'll get it outta the"—

Raph didn't have a chance to finish, as the warehouse door's remote activated above them and the Cowabunga Carl van flooded them with light. Mikey honked several times, trying to make a tune.

"Aw, man, you gotta be kiddin' me!" Raph shouted, gathering tools. Mikey honked again, giggling inside the van.

"We're moving as fast as we can, Michelangelo!" Leo admonished, as he took the kickstand off the old Harley they'd been working on and wheeled it over to the shop proper, on the other side of the warehouse, which was crowded with other vehicles awaiting repair.

Once he'd parked and closed the door, Mikey jumped out, his large Cowabunga Carl head under one arm and a duffle bag over his shoulder. "What's up, guys? You look as gross as I feel."

Leo and Raph looked at each other; each of them was up to his elbows in axle grease and standing water, which had flooded out of one of the saddlebags when they'd started the repair.

"Hey, Mikey—don't make such a show outta bringin' that van in here. I don't want people associating' your clown act with the repair shop, got me?" Raph said, brandishing a wrench.

Michelangelo laughed. "Don't knock it, bro—might bring you some business, if those whack-bag soccer moms drove Harleys, that is."

"Bad day, little brother?" Leo asked as they dropped into the sewers and started home.

"Man—I had this nightmare that these kids were playing 'pin the shell on the Mikey'. It was narly."

Raph hooked his thumbs into his belt. "Yeah, I remember talkin' to that lady you were workin' for today. Sounded like she had her dress on backwards. Just be lucky you didn't have to deal with this nut that brought his bike this afternoon. I swear, guy's got a thirty-year old classic Harley Davidson, leaves it in the damn rain, and comes in to pay extra on an overnight job, like we ain't got enough work to do."

"Aw, and I was gonna ask you put a motor on my skateboard next, Raphi."

Raphael pointed the wrench at him. "Hey—what'd I tell you about callin' me that?"

Leo laughed. "Aw, but it's so cute, Raphi."

"Shut up, Leo!"

"Both of you shut up! I'm on the hotline!" Donnie's voice intruded from his alcove; Mikey had pulled the false drainage pipe that opened them into the den. "Yeah—no—look, just—it's one of the little slots on the side—they look exactly like the end of the plug, sir, I promise you—yeah, plug it in, and put the card in the bus port—the… the *big* one, on the left side! Did you even read the manual to your laptop?"

His brothers snickered as they moved toward the kitchen table, though Mikey fell over the back of the couch and flicked on the TV. Raph took up a grubby notebook.

"Hey, Donnie! You off the line yet?"

"No—pineapple, extra cheese, no anchovies."

"Gotcha. Mikey?"

"Uh… chicken, pepperoni, sausage, mushrooms"—

"The Tuesday, got it. Leo?"

"I'll share one with you—what're you up for?"

"Meat Lovers okay?"

Leo nodded, his head in his hands. He felt Raph watching him for a minute, before moving off to place the pizza order, with a Coke in hand.

"Raphael," an aged voice called from the practice room, "you should not drink so much caffeine before sleep. Your late-night practicing has become disruptive."

Leo could head Raph grinning. "Hey, Master Splinter, if you wanted a pizza all you had to do was ask."

Master Splinter's stooped form shadowed the doorway into the practice room, and at last his whiskers appeared, over which he peered into the kitchen; Mikey looked over the back of the couch at him, and Donnie's chair span out of the alcove, with Donnie sitting in it, his headset fastened around his mask and a bag of pork rinds and a keyboard on his lap.

"My sons. Stand before me," Splinter beckoned. Raph finished the order and hung up, while Donnie disentangled himself. When they had assembled, their master struck up, his voice quiet but strong. "Seventeen years have passed since the death of my beloved Master Yoshi, and too long have I put off visiting the land of his birth, and the resting place of his ashes. Tomorrow morning, I journey to Japan, to the city of Kyoto. I shall be gone for several months, as I must make the journey in stealth, traveling by many boats in concealment. You are old enough now to stay here alone."

Donatello and Michelangelo both made sounds of shock and dismay, while Raphael and Leonardo remained quiet, having known he was leaving already. Leo, however, respectfully raised his head.

"But, Master Splinter—Karai hinted that the Shredder might soon return. What should we do if that happens while you're away in Japan?"

Splinter sighed, a weight on his ancient shoulders. "Leonardo. More than sixteen years ago, I found you, hardly three weeks old, here in the sewers. In that time, you have all grown to possess great strength—it is in that strength that I trust. As long as the four of you remain united, you may take on any adversary." He looked around at their faces. "While I am gone, Leonardo is in charge; if for any reason you should need someone in his stead, you will listen to Donatello. Raphael—you will repair with Casey in the shop *only* at night while I am away, and never during the day, when you may be seen. Michelangelo, you may continue to perform at parties; however, you must remain in the back of the van while April or Casey drives you."

Mikey and Raph riled immediately.

"Aw, I can't ask April to do that—she does enough stuff for us, sensei!" Mikey said, appearing sheepish.

" *What* ? Is this some kinda joke? I'll never get all that work done!" Raphael protested. "Master Splinter"—

Splinter smacked his tail on the ground. "Raphael! I ask this of you for the protection of this family. Follow these rules while I am away and nothing shall befall you, my son."

Raphael closed his eyes, attempting to contain the overwhelming vision of all that work up in the warehouse, which had saved him from the problems of the world outside, that had given him some sense of purpose and accomplishment, however small. Donnie placed a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, my sons. I must complete this journey soon, before I am unable to," Master Splinter intoned; the four brothers looked up into his grizzled, furry face, the face of their only parent, and each of them grew suddenly still. "I shall leave early in the morning."

Leonardo bowed. "We shall wake with you, Father, and say our goodbyes." The turtles all nodded; Master Splinter gave one approving nod, and retreated to meditate. Donnie could not be still.

"You know, Raph, I bet I could build some sort of turnstile that could hide you the moment someone came into the shop. Or a steam-powered dolly down into the sewer, so you could still do repairs during the daytime."

Raph smiled and opened his mouth to respond; Leo cut him off.

"Don't bother, Donnie—his orders are not to be in the shop during the day. Raph, I'll help you at night until Master Splinter returns, okay?"

Raph sighed. "Yeah, alright. Still, I'm gonna have to tell Casey to take in fewer jobs. April's not gonna like this—she and Casey don't have a lot of clients right now in the antiques." He sat down, thinking.

Donnie paced. "Well, Mikey, maybe I could make some holographics card for the van so no one sees you driving—I mean, you can't drive with that big Cowabunga head on, so maybe"—

"No, I got it!" Raph said, snapping his fingers. "Take on a couple more gigs a week, Mikey, and pay April to drive you. You can use the shop for concealment. That'll help them and us."

Donnie looked disappointed. "Aw, come on, guys! I could whip something up in five minutes."

"Hey, don't worry about it, Don—you got your hands full with that tech support line," Leo said, calmingly.

"Yeah, and speakin' of hands full, I'm about to have my hands full of pizza. Toss in, guys—who wants to come with me? The tab's eighteen-fifty with the coupons," Raph said.

Mikey pinched his cheek, tossing a five on the table. "Raphi's been clipping coupons, how cute!"

"Shut up, Mikey! Leo, I got ya for helpin' in the shop today."

Donnie took a five from between the pages of a Spiderman comic. "I'll come with you, Raph. I could use a walk—been in that chair half the day."

Donnie and Raph sat waiting below the broken grille at what they called 122 1/8th to the delivery guys, saying nothing. Raphael looked at the night sky above, remembering free nights under a helmet, riding his bike and chasing perps, keeping one strong and very violent promise that led him further into darkness.

"You worried about Master Splinter leaving?" Donnie asked.

Raphael snorted, sounding as indifferent as possible. "Why should I be worried? I got his rules and you and Leo to tell me what to do. No responsibility, no worries, right?" He'd tried to sound as sarcastic and off-hand as possible; Donatello could hear the anger and the sadness under his voice, though.

"I'm really sorry, Raph. If it makes you feel better, we all know you make a great leader when it comes to battles and strategy. I'm sure Master Splinter only said what he did because I'm good in the at-home and problem-solving arena."

"You know I don't care about bein' leader, Don. I just don't see why I need two brothers around with orders to tell me what to do." He got up and kicked a beer bottle clattering down the passage. "Man, things were just fine for a month—why does Master Splinter hafta leave now too?"

Donatello squinted at his brother. "Wait—I'm not sure if I get what you're angry about."

Raphael sighed, then laughed. "Neither do I. I just—I just wish—I don't know, that things could be good and stay that way for a while, instead of somethin' always bashing in on us."

A Brother's Demons

Don and Mikey hardly remembered saying goodbye to Master Splinter; just Raphael and Leonardo coming to wake them up at four in the morning, both covered in axle grease again and shivering, to watch in the cold sewer as their sensei disappeared into the darkness, holding a bobbing lantern. When they awoke for work the next morning, they saw Leonardo asleep in his bottom bunk, and heard the sounds of Raphael's restless fists burying themselves repeatedly into the punching bag, monotonous and tired. Despite having been up all night, Raphael did not take a chance to sleep; he trained, he kick boxed, he fixed things around the den, never sitting lest he lapse off, a restless blur. He was more quiet than usual. Leo slept longer than normal, as though on purpose. After nightfall, they disappeared up to the shop, returned for an unusual, uncomfortable and meditative dinner, and then went back. Donnie remained on the hotline and on his surveillance equipment the entire day. Mikey, when he wasn't working, played video games. The specter of incompleteness was upon them.

This continued another two days; they were mourning for something that hadn't happened, but very well could, out of their control, out of their sight, and beyond anything they could fight against. Raphael had stopped talking entirely; he appeared at the point of exhaustion.

"Um… Leo?" Donatello whispered in his alcove, watching Raph search around in vain for something to distract him, his eyes sometimes following things that weren't there. "Should I slip him some sleeping pills or something?"

"No," Leo muttered, staring at Raphael. "He has demons to fight."

The next morning, however, Leonardo did not go to bed after he and Raph finished in the shop; he instead stood meditatively in the den, surveying his brothers; Michelangelo, who didn't have a gig that day, watching Wrestle Mania on the TV with a bag of Cheetos; Donnie

talking listlessly to a moronic caller on the hotline; Raphael's shadow on the floor falling in from the practice room, the heavy punching bag standing as a formidable and insurmountable enemy that hardly seemed to move at all while he sent all of his energy into it. Leonardo, using a finger, whistled loudly, and it rang throughout the forgotten, manmade cavern.

"Alright—everyone in here and in front of me!"

Mikey came apathetically, Cheetos in hand; Donnie appeared annoyed, after having to hang up so hurriedly on the hotline; Raph came last, his eyes hooded and his knuckles badly bruised, dark green and purples.

"I know we've all been doing our individual training in between work, but if the Foot Clan is reforming we'll have to step up the group training. Why don't we do some warm-ups then some long-range attack runs in the sewer, in two teams? I'll run with Donnie; Raph, you run with Mikey. Sound like a plan?"

His younger brothers mumbled and grumbled assent, or merely nodded, as in Raphael's case. After a low-key group warm-up in the training room, Leo led them into the sewer tunnels, where they could run and use the different textures of the underground to flex their resourcefulness in changing settings. Donnie lagged behind with him as Mikey and Raph walked ahead.

"Good thinking. If anyone can tire Raph out, it's Mikey."

Leo nodded, smiling; however, after an hour of various runs, both Donatello and Leonardo noticed that Raphael's exhaustion had led him to not fight in angry sprints, as he normally did. He instead fought methodically, almost mechanically, losing often, as the backbone of his fighting style rested in his passion—which he currently couldn't tap—and the backbone of Mikey's was his energy—which he had in no short supply. And Michelangelo, who couldn't seem to grab his brother's attention by fighting or winning, began to grow bored.

"Hey, Raph, watsa matter? Aren't you a little peeved that you're gettin' your butt kicked by your baby brother? Huh?" Mikey taunted; Leonardo, hearing him one tunnel over, stopped and gestured, exasperated, for Donnie to follow him.

"Come on, Raphi—does this mean—oh no!—that I might be better than you? What would the street punks say if they knew that the Nightwatcher got his butt kicked by his little bro, huh?"

Raphael blinked, hazy and tired, unable even to glare through his red-rimmed eyes. "Go stuff yourself, Mikey," he managed.

"Ooh, scary! You know what they'd say?" Michelangelo spun, and smacked Raph's shell with a whirring nunchaku, sending him face-first into a pipe. "They'd say, 'wow, where'd that freak who used to kick our shells go? Oh, his little brother beat him up—what a *loser* !'"

Neither Raphael nor Michelangelo was sure at that point what hit them. Raph experienced a sensation of lightness, darkening tunnel vision, and a great amount of energy he wasn't even aware he possessed charging through his muscles, telling them to hit and run, and hit again, no matter what he came in contact with. Mikey, on the other hand, floundered away from Raphael charging toward him and suddenly found himself falling, tumbling, rolling, the sound of a snap he was sure had to be Raph's brain and then saw only darkness and small lights before he dreamt.

Donatello and Leonardo, arriving for the end of this, both shouted in dismay as they saw Mikey disappear down a large shaft full of smaller pipes, and saw Raph stumble, losing control of his body. He was screaming unintelligibly as Leo ran to calm him. Donnie looked over the shaft, shouting his brother's name.

"I see him—he's not moving! We gotta get down there, Leo!"

"I can't—Donnie, help me!"

Leo struggled to keep Raph pinned on his shell, who was kicking and flailing as though a child in the throes of a terrifying nightmare; his screams had begun to make sense.

"Mikey—oh god, I killed him, oh damn—Mikey!"

"Raph—listen to me," Leo pleaded, "Don and I have to go down and check on him, which means you gotta calm down!"

Donnie, however, after a minute of trying to keep Raph on the ground, finally reached into his shell and brought out a small case—its contents, a half-full tranquilizer dart belonging to Winters Corp. He plunged the needle into one of Raph's rapidly moving arms and pumped the liquid into his veins, pushing into the spot just above it and steadily releasing pressure; as he did so, Raphael's screams died away into hapless whispers, and the sound of his ragged breathing filled the silent sewers. His pupils, grown very small from massive doses of adrenaline, now dilated to fill his entire iris with blank black, and he fell into a half-awake, stupefied doze.

"What the heck was that?" Leo asked heavily, putting Raph's other arm down, now that it was no longer dangerous.

"One of those tranquilizers Winters's generals used on you guys; I saved a couple, but this one had only a halfa dose left," Donnie explained. "Best to sedate him for now, while we get Mikey and move him back to the den."

Leo and Donnie found Michelangelo at the bottom of the shaft, with a broken arm, a few bruises, and a semi-serious concussion (so Donatello called it) on his right forehead—and subsequently, unconscious. Donnie looked up at his elder brother.

"You were behind me when we came in—what did you see, Leo?"

Leo thought. "I saw Raph charging him and throwing punches—seemed like he was missing, though—and then I saw Mikey fall."

Donnie held up a finger. "Exactly. Raphael snapped, went berserker, and he probably either pushed Mikey or tripped him, not thinking clearly about what he was doing."

Leo frowned. "I don't know if I saw Raph push him—I don't think he was close enough. And besides, Raph might've lost his cool, but I don't think he'd throw Mikey nearly two floors down a sewer shaft."

Donnie didn't answer, and merely acknowledged Leo's response with a scholarly "hmmmmmm…."

It was nearly an hour before the pair of them got their younger brothers back into the den, though Raphael, particularly helpful while sedated, tried his best to walk. On the way, he made a strange habit of pawing at Leo's hand and giggling feebly, as though attempting to tell him something. Donnie put his hands on his hips and surveyed Raph, who was half-lying and half-sitting on the couch, while Leo began splinting and casting Mikey's arm at the table.

"Chronic insomnia, sudden large doses of adrenaline, most likely little-to-no serotonin, slowed reaction time until the release of epinephrine… you know, Leo"—

"He needs sleep, Donnie, that's it," Leo placated. "If you're worried he'll wake up and try for Mikey again, give him the other tranquilizer. At least he'll make up for the last three days a little bit."

Donnie paced a moment. "Well, I had already planned on doing that. But think—what if what we just saw is endemic of a larger problem?"

Leonardo was not convinced. "What, like Raph's anger management? I could've told you that, and I'm not the genius here."

Donnie almost jumped with excitement. "No, that's just it, don't you see—what if his *anger* is endemic of a larger issue as well? What if Raphael is, and has been, experiencing massive chemical imbalances causing, and made worse by, periods of chronic insomnia that deepen the problem and cause him to go into rapid

bouts of aggression? What if the problem is not psychological, but *physiological* ?"

Leo massaged a green temple. "Don, I speak English, Spanish, and some Japanese, and I still didn't understand half of what you just said."

Donatello stopped pacing, a grin on his face, filled with the light of scientific discovery. "Look, Leo—what I'm saying is, maybe Master Splinter has failed to channel Raph's anger because *science* has to take him the rest of the way! I bet I could correct the imbalance, fix up some mix of brain chemicals based on his physiology or some neuro-inhibitors, and he'd be just fine!"

Leo felt slightly uncomfortable. "Fix? I don't know, Donnie—he's not the shell cycle."

"Just let me try—I'll run everything past you—just a few tests," Donnie asked eagerly.

Leonardo watched the floor for a minute, before alighting on Michelangelo's unconscious face. "Go ahead. Just be careful with him—he *is* our brother. I'll get Mikey's head wrapped up with some ice and into one of our beds. There's no way we're getting him up to the top bunk."

Donnie smiled, already at the chem set. "Put him in mine. And give him Godzilla."

Leo snickered. "That's sweet of you Donnie—sixteen years and you're finally sharing all your toys."

Donnie snorted, his magnifying goggles strapped firmly to his face and headset on, where he could dictate notes to one of the computers. "Tell me that the next time you're scaling a sheer wall without equipment *I* invented, big brother."

An hour later Mikey was safely tucked in with both his panda bear and Godzilla in Donnie's bed, along with a small dose of pain-killers to help him move into normal sleep less fitfully, and Raphael, full to the eyeballs with one-and-a-half darts of animal tranquilizer, was sleeping so deeply and so still that Leo found himself continually returning to check his pulse.

"Don, is he gonna be able to wake up?"

"Not for a few days, would be my hypothesis," Donnie responded unconcernedly. "I forgot to save any to map out the formula and avoid any complications, so I'll have to take samples of his blood in addition to his brain fluid."

Leo swallowed forcibly, going a bit greener than normal. "Yeah—you just be sure to tell me before you do that, or you're gonna have three sick turtles on your hands."

Donnie whirled on him, his eyes magnified behind his goggles and a very large syringe in his hand. "Want some Dramamine?"

Leo almost fell off the couch, where he'd been sitting beside Raphael's head. "Whoa—what the heck is that for?"

Donnie shook his head. "Don't be such a trypanophobic, Leo."

"I have never been afraid of enclosed spaces, Donnie, and I don't see what that has to do with that crazy needle you're throwing around."

"Trypanophobia is an irrational fear of needles, Leo, and this one's not for you. It's for the base of Raphael's head, and it's gotta be big, because he's got some pretty thick skin." Donnie came forward, and Leo edged around the couch away from him.

"Yeah—great—you do that"—Leo backed into the table—"I'll just go… order us a pizza. Yeah."

Donnie smiled and shook his head, as thirty seconds later he had a small amount of fluid from Raphael's brain and a vial ready for blood, while listening to Leo being violently sick outside the den.

"You know, for someone who slashes at people with swords all day, Leo"—he shouted out playfully to his brother.

"Stuff it, Donnie!" Leo heaved, breathing hard and sounding utterly nauseous.

Beyond Control

A couple days and what seemed to Leo several hundred shots later, the elder brothers found themselves sitting disheveled in the kitchen; Leo had been staying up nights to keep Raph caught up in his shop work, and Donnie had been busy rescheduling Mikey's gigs; they were both surrounded by bargain instant pizza boxes and generic cereal, as well as several sheets of paper covered front to back with stoichiometric equations.

Michelanglo had woken a few times for a bit of food but hadn't been up to saying much, the bump on his head making him tired and the pain-killers for his arm only making it worse, so they let him sleep and didn't worry too much. His arm had fractured cleanly and would heal quickly; as for his head, he'd hit it worse before on his skateboard.

Leo gave Donnie's current sheet of equations a cursory glance; his brother had been answering calls on the hotline while mixing various formulas, sending large data sets into his computers for analysis, in his spare time trying to help Leo regulate Raphael's temperature, which had been fluctuating dangerously over the days, and generally exhausting himself fixing the initial chemical mistakes he'd made in the formulation.

"Okay, so, let me get this straight—first we have to correct the imbalances you created with the preemptory tests, and then we can fix the real problem?"

Donnie sighed. "I didn't map the tranquilizer formula correctly, and the imbalance caused an abnormal amount of NREM sleep. So he's still not creating serotonin, and he's having a series of night terrors—thus the seizures"—

Leo started. "When did that happen?"

"Last night I detected the brain activity of two petit mal seizures during NREM sleep while you were up in the shop. It's not that serious but if they progress we could have a real problem on our hands."

Leo moaned and leaned back in his chair. "This is a nightmare, Donnie."

Donatello continued with his equations. "Don't worry, I can fix it, I assure you. It's all in finding the right combination." He looked up, as though suddenly having an idea. "And, you know, after all the data I've collected, Leo, we could really have a serious weapon on our hands if the Foot ever attacked us again. If I could make a catalyst and somehow get a recombinant airborne"—

" *No* . That's no honorable way to fight, no matter whom the enemy is," Leo corrected staunchly. "And even worse to use your own brother as the guinea pig. I'm surprised at you, Donnie."

"Hey!" Donnie riled. "I'm trying to *help* him, and I might be more successful with it than either you or Master Splinter have ever been!" He stood and began to pace, studying the sheet of equations. "What bothers me is that I can't tell what's causing what—is the fever causing the night terrors, or are the night terrors coupled with something else causing the fever?"

"You mean like the chicken and the egg?" Leo asked, his eyes closed.

"Chicken…" Raph whispered dreamily on the couch, and rolled over on his stomach. Donnie sighed in relief.

"He's moved into a lighter stage of sleep. The drip must've been successful."

Leo folded his arms. "Or maybe the sedatives finally wore off."

Donnie ignored him and cleared a few pizza boxes away from in front of one of his monitors. "He should be slipping into a period of REM sleep soon. After he's begun making serotonin, we'll introduce some that's made synthetically into his blood stream—that should slow the overproduction of epinephrine and norepinephrine without lowering the amount of dopamine. He should be able to go into normal sleep cycles again. I might also have to give him depressants as a precaution to suppress the adrenaline."

This translated to Leo as more needles; he'd never felt so bad for Raphael as he did then, and was thankful his brother didn't have to be awake for any of it. A thought occurred to him.

"How much of this do you think he'll remember?"

Donnie scratched his head. "Well, night terrors aren't really dreams—just vague but intense feelings of danger and panic—and they're known for causing periods of amnesia. Seizures can do the same thing. I wouldn't be surprised if he woke up disoriented for a while, but it'll go away. Like hitting your head with a baseball."

Leo, unable to make sense of this, sat down near Raphael's head and propped it up with a pillow. "Whatever, Donnie. How's it going, little bro?" he asked Raph's sleeping form; he had begun moving again, his eyes flickering, and was making small noises.

"Leo… gotta find the peanut butter…"

Leonardo smiled and patted his brother's shell; Donnie frowned. "Just don't get in the way sitting there, Leo. If you unplug one of those drips you could really put him in danger."

Leo snorted but held his tongue, leaning back on the couch and listening to Donnie's jury-rigged heart monitor and the steady beeps of Raphael's pulse. The sound settled him, like a music box, sweeping him into a doze—winding down, slowing, lilting—he started into wakefulness, reacting perhaps to instinct or to a feeling of wrongness; he hadn't been dreaming—Raphael's heart was slowing

down. His brother was very calm beside him, unnoticing; Donnie, however, had noted it too.

"Damn it—the depressant is reacting with the tranquilizer still—it'll destroy the whole process, but I'll have to give him adrenaline to keep his heart from stopping."

Leonardo stood to get out of his way, and came face to face with Donnie unhooking the depressant drip and replacing it with a fat needle full of adrenaline—and nearly fainted.

When the wave of nausea passed he found Donnie bracing his arm with one hand and holding Raphael's chest down with the other. He'd placed a fold of fabric in between Raph's teeth to keep him from biting his tongue or grinding them together too hard, while his muscles all seemed to be convulsing in different directions all at once. The heart monitor sounded like the rapid countdown to a bomb exploding. After a few nerve-wracking moments it settled down at last, and so did Raph, breathing hard in long gasps and lapsing, for the most part, back into a fitful sleep. Donnie started preparing another syringe; Leo ceased gripping the side of the couch for dear life and shoved his genius brother roughly away.

"Give it a rest for a minute, Donnie, and let the guy sleep!"

"Leo, I have to"—

" *No* . Let everything run out of his system before you try anything else. You're gonna kill him at this rate!"

Donatello, now breathing hard, gripped the needle. "It doesn't work that way—if you'd just let me work, I could get this right and he'd be perfectly fine! What d'you know about brain chemistry or stoichiometry, Leo? You're the one who's gonna get him killed!"

Leo stared at him for a moment. "You know what, Donnie—the Foot may be reforming as we speak, Master Splinter's gone, Michelangelo's unconscious, Raphael's been spending time having

nightmares and seizures that he should have been spending training and working on channeling his anger, I feel like I'm gonna heave every two minutes watching this experiment, and from the way you're acting, I'm not sure you're ready to work with this team either! You're putting science above your family, and I never thought I'd have to see that."

Donnie stared open-mouthed. "I'm doing what I've always done—using what I know and my skills to *help* my family. I think you're the one having problems, Leo—you just hate being powerless when other people have the answers."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Sure, Don—you've got all the answers. That's why our brother's heart is stopping."

"That's just my point! You don't know what's going on, you hardly understand a thing I'm talking about, you don't have a clue what's wrong with Raph, and you're *lecturing* me! Just admit you have no control over this situation and let me handle things, okay?" Donnie angrily grabbed a towel from under Leo's hand and dried Raph's forehead. "Maybe with the introduction of synthetic adrenaline his body will think it has enough epinephrine and stop producing it."

Leo sat down, attempting to be humble. "Okay, Don—I'm willing to find out. Have you actually found an imbalance that would explain Raphael's anger?"

Donnie put his headset on, ready for calls from the hotline, and started up another drip. "Well—there's a possibility that what I found is a result of his sleep deprivation prior to the incident, but my prognosis is that Raphael routinely produces more adrenaline than he needs; he thus has trouble sleeping, produces less serotonin, and produces even more adrenaline to make up the difference. But while the two chemicals do a lot of the same things, they also have very different effects; and as we've seen in Raphael, all that extra adrenaline translates to hyper agitation and bouts of violent behavior."

Leo sighed. "So he needs sleep?"

Donnie made a frustrated sound. "No, Leo, he needs to make less adrenaline in the first place, or he'll continue these cycles indefinitely."

"And you know this?"

Donnie held up a correctional finger. "No true scientist *knows* , Leo, but I do seriously hypothesize."

Leo leaned into the couch again and resettled Raph on a pillow, placing the cold rag back on his forehead. "I'd rather just give him some aspirin—we could cook a pizza on his skin."

Raph tossed a bit. "Mikey—where's Mikey? The peanut butter's after 'im…"

The next morning Leo and Donnie found themselves again surrounded by old cereal and pizza boxes and equations. The previous night they had finally gotten Raphael into Leo's bottom bunk without the heart monitor and with only a shot of nutrients and sugar water; overnight Donnie had taken a few naps and gone back to his hotline and the equations, while Leo had worked in the shop in between a few hours sleep. Now, while they both concentrated on spreading Cocoa Puffs on a cheese and pineapple instant pizza for breakfast, they heard the sound of someone stumbling haphazardly down the stairs from the bunks.

Donnie smiled. "Phew. Mikey must be on his feet—that'll make things… well, more entertaining, at least."

Leo stared at the den. "Raph?"

Donnie started, blinking. "What are you doing up?"

It was indeed Raphael, walking in slipshot lines and trying to get to the kitchen, while holding onto things on the way. Leo stood and

went to help him into a chair.

"Hey, Raphi—how you feeling?"

Raph sat for a minute, as though contemplating the question, while Donnie went for something in his alcove. Leo waited patiently for an answer; after about thirty seconds, Raph asked, startled, "What?"

"How do you feel?" Leo asked again, patting his shoulder.

"Oh…" Raph said, looking around and struggling. "Um… chair. Yeah. Chair."

Leo tried to keep his smile, but gripped his brother's arm, feeling a sense of panic wash up over him. Raph watched him, and he seemed helplessly aware that he'd said the wrong thing, but didn't know how to fix it.

Donnie came out of his alcove, a bottle in one hand and his headset firmly in place. He began writing notes quickly on a small PDA-like device.

"It's okay, Leo, we can work with that. Lemme collect some blood samples and we'll be in business."

Raph watched Donatello dazedly, and held onto the table edge as though he were getting seasick.

"Alright, Donnie, calm down—he's disoriented. And you get out that needle again and we're both bound to be sick," Leo said, trying to joke.

"Don't panic, Leo, I'll warn you ahead of time," Donnie chuckled, pouring a bowl of cereal; he was conscious of Raph watching as he emptied a mixture of nutrients and depressants into the bowl with the milk. He pushed the bowl towards his brother and went back to furiously writing notes. "Alright, Raph, have some breakfast. Leo, make sure he eats everything, huh?"

Leo was sure what Raphael was trying to express at that moment was a panic attack; he stared at the bowl and attempted to speak, but only managed unintelligible gasps. At intervals, he shook his head; at last, Leo pushed the bowl away, sure that he wouldn't be able to get Raph to eat from it. Instead, he handed him a slice of pizza with Cocoa Puffs.

"Here, Raph, get something in your system."

"Th-thank, Leo."

Donatello looked up as Raph took it, who was now appearing relieved.

"Leo, are you crazy? What did I tell you yesterday?"

"Look, Don, he's a little out of it right now but he's not stupid. He's not a lab rat or something—just let him have some breakfast in peace, okay? You've shot him up with enough junk in the last few days."

Raph watched them, confused; it was difficult to watch big, tough Raphael sit as though he were so much smaller, and appear that way too, and so Leo and Donnie avoided staring; while they did that, Raph, at a loss with the pizza, rolled it crust first into a tight wheel, and ate it that way. He giggled.

"Hey, Leo—pizza burrito."

And promptly dropped off his chair.

Leo and Donnie looked under the table simultaneously, to see Raph sitting under it and eating his pizza burrito rather happily with both hands.

"Pizza burrito," Leo whispered, reminiscently.

"Yeah, what about it?" Donnie asked, distracted as he wrote more notes. Leo was still watching their little brother.

"It's the way Raph and I used to eat our pizza when we were, like, five. He's acting ten years younger, Donnie."

"He's just disoriented, Leo, he'll snap out of it," Donnie placated, by rote. "Oh, shoot, I'm beeping over—IT Tech Support, this is Donnie speaking. How may I help you?"

"Jeez," Leo moaned, and looked Raph in the eye under the table. "I promise you, he really is trying, Raph. Maybe a little too much."

Raph nodded, blinking at his older brother and scooting nearer to his feet.

"Hey, guys, how ya doing?" came Mikey's voice, who bounded down the stairs with his arm in a sling. Donnie dropped his notes and ripped off his headset.

"Hey, Mikey, you're awake! How's that arm feeling?"

Mikey shrugged. "It's okay, I guess. Hey, Raph, watcha doin' under the table? Afraid I'm gonna beat ya again in training?"

Donnie smiled. "Oh, yeah—don't be worried about him going berserk on you again, Mikey. He's harmless."

Leo had felt Raph go very still under the table when Mikey had come in; he was now getting back up onto a chair to hide behind him, tugging on his shell.

"Leo—ghost— *Leo* !"

"Yeah, I'll say harmless—he's acting like he's five," Leonardo said, more to Donnie than anything, then took Raph's wrists to try and calm him. "Raphi, he's not a ghost, he's fine!"

Mikey scratched his bandaged head. "Whoa, what's wrong with *him* ? I musta dragged him down with me when I tripped. Hey, Raphi, you bump your head too, bro?"

Leo and Donnie whirled. " *Tripped* ?"

Mikey laughed. "Yeah—Raph went all schitzoid and I was getting' out of his way when I fell. Bumped my noggin pretty good, didn't I?"

Leo groaned and leaned back, still holding Raphael's wrists, who continued to squirm and panic; he calmed when his brother handed him another slice of pizza to distract him, and he rolled it into a burrito as he had the last one. Leo could hear Donnie swallow hard and tap the table nervously with his PDA device.

"Hey, pizza burrito!" Mikey pointed excitedly. "Raph hasn't done that in years"—here Mikey stopped, having realized what he'd just said —"What the heck'd he do to himself? He's all swabbed up and stuff. And acting like he's five or something."

Raphael's numerous shots were evidenced by the many gauze wraps around several veins on his arms and legs, as well as the one at the base of his head.

"Donatello happened to him," Leo said, crossing his arms. "We thought he pushed you after going berserker; Donnie figured there might be some physical problem behind it, started experimenting, and everything that could've gone wrong *did* ."

"So—you made him five again? Bogus," Mikey said, rubbing his head. "He was, like, not sleeping and stuff."

Donnie pounded the table, making the boxes rattle. "What, so all of this is suddenly all my responsibility, Leo? You approved—you were there for every step of the experiment. It's not like I did everything alone, you know!"

Leo stood up, a hand on Raph's shell, who was watching them over his pizza with big eyes. "Oh, no you don't, Don—what happened to me having no control over the situation—me letting *you* handle everything because I don't know anything about chemistry or whatever? You don't get it both ways! What, you're responsible when

the experiment goes right, but if it goes wrong, everything's my fault because I let it happen?"

"Don't foist it all on me, Leo—you've been standing in the way of doing this right since step one! If you'd just let me work"—

"Oh, please, Don—you're such a child! That's why even your younger brothers feel more responsible for the problems of the world than you do. Everything comes down to your experiments, your discoveries—you just have to be needed, have to have your secrets and your stupid superiority, as though it ever gets you anywhere!"

Donatello stood as well, and marched around the table to take Raphael's arm, who squeezed his eyes shut as though someone had threatened to hit him. "If all you can think about is placing the blame, Leo, then I'll just take Raph and make sure he gets the care he needs. And when you feel like helping me, you can just say you're sorry for being such an interminable control freak!"

Seeing his brother recoil, Leo shoved Donnie's arm away. "God, Donnie, can't you see he's scared of you? He knows what you're doing to him—do you even think about what's actually happening to his mind, or do the ends just justify the means? You're not curing him, you're making him sick!"

Michelangelo's eyes darted between them as though he were watching a tennis match; he'd been squinting and frowning at them increasingly, until he saw Raph drop off his chair to hide under the table, shaking uncontrollably.

"Dude, you think *he* went berserker? You've both gone totally whack-job!" Mikey said, disbelievingly. He squatted and led Raph out from under the table, who stared at him, now that he had a hold of his arm.

"Mikey? Not a costume?" Raph asked, now that he knew he was solid. "No ghost?"

Mikey smiled. "Whoa, my brother, you thought you killed me? You couldn't even give me a shiner that day!" He patted his brother's shell. "C'mon, man, you gotta sleep that crap off and get back to your regular psychotic self, not this weird new one."

Leo pushed Donnie back as he attempted to go around the table to head Mikey off.

"Mikey, no—you're in no condition to work with Raph if something unpredictable happens with his brain chemistry!" Donnie protested. Mikey laughed.

"You know I love ya, bro, but I couldn't do much worse with 'im than *you* did—no offense."

Leo gave a half-smile as Mikey led Raphael back up to the bunks, and said nothing; their youngest brother had had the gumption to do what he hadn't done, and he couldn't complain about that. Donnie glared at him for a moment.

"I hope you realize the amount of extreme danger both of them could be in! And this time, it's totally your fault if something happens—you'll be lucky if I try to bail you out like I always do!" he snarled, shoved a chair aside, and disappeared into his alcove, where Leo could hear the chem set clinking and whirring into life.

"Whatever, Don," Leo murmured, to an empty den, and sat down to his pizza. He smiled at his slice. After some contemplation, he rolled it, crust first, into a tight wheel, and thought about his brothers, alone in the kitchen.

Night Terrors

Michelangelo had set a chair beside the bed in which Raphael was sleeping, to stand guard against his brothers; being injured and being Mikey, however, he'd fallen asleep in that chair by evening, and it was at that point that Donnie snuck in, a syringe with nutrients and a small mix of depressants in hand. He swabbed alcohol on Raph's arm and whispered to him in his sleep.

"Sorry about the shots, little brother—it's just to regulate that adrenaline. You won't feel a thing." He pricked him with the needle, careful not to get too close to Mikey, who snored in his upright position, with Godzilla tucked into his uninjured arm.

"That better be sugar water, Donatello," Leo's voice whispered threateningly from the doorway; he came into the room, advancing on his brother; Donnie whirled, the empty syringe held aloft as a weapon of righteousness. Leo almost staggered, and grabbed the bunk bed's wooden post. He pulled at Donnie by the shell with the other hand, scowling, shaking him forcibly. "What was in there? Answer me!"

"Calm down!" Donnie hissed. "You'll wake them up!"

"Wake who up?" Mikey asked drowsily, seeing his brothers. "Hey—what're you two up to?"

Donnie, business-like and matter-of-fact, held up the needle. "Just a rudimentary supplement with some amino acids, iron, calcium, depressants, nucleic acids, vitamin C and E"—

Leo folded his arms. "Don't even try thinking I didn't hear that, Donnie."

Donnie threw his arms up peaceably. "A very, very small amount—nothing like the quantity he got yesterday. Just to help me suppress

adrenaline production a little bit. And he's creating serotonin as we speak. He should be right as rain in a day or two. Told you I'd figure it out."

Leo made an exasperated sound. "Yeah, and what are the possible side-effects?"

"Well, I mixed a couple other things in there—in negligible amounts—to help stave off any negative reactions with whatever else might be in his system. The worst that could happen is a little talking in his sleep—he's going to be having a lot of REM cycles and slow wave sleep in the next few days."

Leo and Mikey exchanged glances.

"D'you know what he just said?" Mikey asked. "I'm totally lost."

Leo returned to the den from the warehouse near midnight for a snack; he found Michelangelo raiding the fridge as he came in, looking as though he had much the same thing on his mind, but having trouble because of his arm.

"Hey—instant pizza, little brother?"

"Yeah, with marshmallows," Mikey said, struggling with a bag of large multicolored Mallows.

"You're gonna make yourself totally sick one day, just like you used to do day after Halloween. How's Raph doing—talking in his sleep yet?"

Mikey raised a figurative eyebrow. "Naw, dude—silent as the grave, actually."

Leo gave him a dirty look. "That's not a funny use of words, bro—not after what we've been through in the last few days."

"Seriously, man. I've been checking his pulse, he's so quiet. I'm sorta used to the way you guys breathe when ya sleep, and Raph just ain't

doing it."

Leo laughed. "Yeah, I was doing that the first time it happened. Freaky, huh?"

They sat down to their pizza, listening to Donnie speaking impatiently with a customer on the hotline who seemed to be having trouble with networking for an online RPG party.

"So, uh… which one of them's crazy right now?" Mikey asked, grinning.

" *Seriously* ," Leo scoffed. "But Don really has been working his shell off. I feel a little bad for him—everything's been going wrong. If it was going wrong on a lab hamster or a Foot ninja instead of on Raph, he'd probably have my sympathy."

Leo accompanied Mikey to the bunk room after their pizza to check on Raphael; when they got there, however, they found the sheets ruffled, the chair upturned, and Raph gone.

"What the— *Donnie* …" Leo growled. Mikey stopped him.

"Don's been on the hotline this whole time, Leo—he musta got outta bed on his own. Maybe he's down watching TV or something."

They rumbled down the stairs and surveyed the den, seeing nothing, and peeked in on Donnie in his alcove, who was now at the chem set, faced away from his surveillance gear. He turned to look at them.

"Donnie—you seen Raph?" Leo asked, leaning against the doorway. Donatello frowned at him.

"Leo? What're you doing here? I thought I just heard you leave for the shop."

Mikey swallowed. "Major uh-oh, dudes."

Donnie grabbed his PDA with its notes and Leo led them from the den into the sewers.

"Hey, Don—what're you doing playing on that thing at a time like this?" he asked, seeing his brother fiddling with the PDA as they ran.

"I'm not *playing* —I injected Raph with a small dissolving tracker device. It should be good for another day or so. He's one level up, near the subway tunnels. I don't detect any other life signs in his proximity, other than a few rats and insects."

"By himself?" Leo asked, jumping up on a ladder. "Maybe he's back to his old brooding self."

"Something tells me we've got no such luck, my brothers," Mikey said, now on the level above them, listening to the rumble of the subways. "That nut-job of ours is gonna get himself seen, and then Master Splinter's gonna ground us for life."

Leonardo grinned. "Or maybe just Donnie."

"That's enough from the proverbial peanut gallery," Donnie, stopping them. "My tracker indicates that he's about fifty yards due east, between two parallel train tracks. He's stopped walking."

They found Raphael standing, his shell to them, in a tunnel connecting two tracks going in opposite directions, used for maintenance. The rumbling of trains surrounded them; Donatello used his PDA to try and figure out what direction they were coming from. Leo walked to the edge, trying to get his brother's attention.

"Hey, Raph—what're you doing, little brother?"

Raphael half-turned; his eyes appeared glazed, and he didn't look directly at them. "Utroms got Mikey. It's all my fault—gotta save 'im."

Lights flooded both tunnels, sending Leonardo backwards away from the glare; Raph turned from him, staring at the whirl of illumination

coming towards him from the northbound subway. Donatello froze, clutching his PDA, though Leo was calling his name.

"Donnie! What's wrong with him?"

"Raphi—it's okay—I'm right here, dude!" Mikey called; Raph appeared confused, looking around, before the noise became deafening.

"He's—he's sleepwalking!" Donnie said, staring and at a loss. "The depressants—the slow wave sleep—this is all my fault…"

" *Donnie* !" Leo shouted, unable to hear, before waving a dismissive hand at him.

"Leo, don't jar him! You have to convince him he's completed the task he set out to do!"

Raphael, however, had begun to walk into the path of the northbound train.

"There's no time!" Leo shouted back; he leapt across the track of the southbound; silhouetted in lights, he grabbed Raphael away as the northbound rushed across, a foot in front of their faces—and threw them both back into the shadows and safety, back across the tracks of the southbound—just as it, too, lanced by him. He looked back, watching the glare of the trains through their windows, before each disappeared, and the immense clatter diminished.

Raphael landed on his shell with Leo's arm over him, and began struggling, disoriented and mumbling incoherently. Mikey snapped his fingers and came over, kneeling beside his brothers.

"Boy, those utroms nearly got you good, Raphi. Thanks for savin' me! Time to go back to bed, huh, guys?"

Raph calmed, breathing hard, squinting at Mikey, his eyes still glazed. "Yeah—the utroms—yeah. There you are, Mikey… you gotta

be more careful."

Leo and Mikey gently pulled him to his feet and began leading him away.

"Good job, Raph—back to bed, now…" Leo said, smiling a bit. Donnie came forward.

"Here—lemme help, guys"—

"I think you've helped enough," Leonardo scowled, but Mikey held a hand out to his brother, peaceably.

"Keep an eye out for more trains and stuff on your gizmo there, Don, while we get Raph back, okay?"

Donatello swallowed, patted Raphael's shoulder, and nodded, leading the way for them with his PDA. They got back to the den without incident; surprisingly, though, Mikey settled Raph on the couch with his pillow, and began moving all the chemicals and the heart monitor as far away as he could. He loaded up the area with snacks and sat down next to his brother's head, remote control in hand to flick on a late-night sci-fi movie.

"What are you up to, Mikey?" Leo asked, watching him.

"Well, dude, if I'm gonna stay awake and make sure Raph doesn't get up again and you two don't pull anything, I might as well be watching TV, right?"

Leo took a breath, and pushed Donnie into his alcove; Don didn't fight back, however—just stood staring down and gripping his PDA, waiting for the blow which never came.

"You know what's the worst part about this, Don?" Leo asked, rhetorically. Donnie shook his head. "I actually expect better out of you. When Mikey's not taking things seriously and Raph's being the rebel, I've always had you behind me to back me up. I'd never

believe you could be so thoughtless—and it's not just that you disobeyed orders. It's that you just can't accept that you might not always know best."

"I know. I know, Leo, and I'm sorry. I'm ready for whatever penalty there is," Donnie whispered.

Leo shook his head. "Two of your brothers almost died tonight. Penalize yourself." And with that, he walked away, padded up to the bedroom, and fell into his own bunk.

Donatello stood in his relatively quiet alcove for a long while; he could hear Mikey talking to Raph while he slept, commenting on the stupid "Giant Lizard from Dimension Y" or whatever, and eating Ding-Dongs; he glared around listlessly, alighting first on his many tech books and manuals, discarded coffee cans reused in his capable hands for smaller tools, for floppy disks and miniature CDs; he scanned over the numerous screens, in various states of clarity, some snowy and others LCD, spanning four decades of New York refuse, depending on the sewer level he'd collected them from, their images showing New York from Queens, Staten Island, Brooklyn, downtown Manhattan, the Bronx, the Foot's old headquarters over on Lairdman Island, City Hall, the warehouse, the space outside their front door, April and Casey's apartment building, and Harlem above, with one dark screen that he still had hooked up to the inactive Cowabunga Carl head; each showed links to places within the lair and various satellite hook-ups around the world he'd managed to hack into or gain access to through April's connections. He could still smell the slight natural gas odor from his Bunsen burner; a mixture of vitamins had congealed on the table; the ascorbic acid smelled slightly sour in its open bottle.

Donnie paced in the small area, trying to turn and find something to distract himself; utterly lost, he at last gasped back a monster that had nestled within his stomach and shoved it out through his fist, burying it in a twenty-year-old TV screen, destroying the image of the darkened warehouse. He realized his face was wet.

"Everything okay, Donnie?" Mikey called, his voice saying that he knew the answer.

"Just… just dropped a monitor," Donnie responded, staring at his bleeding knuckles. He placed a rag over it, put on his headset, and sat down, staring at the wider world without interest. Leo was right; he had nothing to do with any of it.

Into Reality

Raphael realized he was waking up when he figured out that the person telling him how to make a feta and sardine pizza belonged to a cooking show. He convinced his eyes to open, and slowly began taking stock of blurry surroundings; the large TV was on, and a woman in clothes that matched her kitchen set rather creepily was demonstrating homemade pizza techniques and unique recipes. His head was resting on a pillow; the pillow was propped up against something else; that something else couldn't be the couch arm because it was… moving. He could feel a slight pressure on his shell.

"Aw, hey, Raphi—welcome back to the world, bro," Mikey's voice came from just above him. Raphael realized he'd been propped up against his brother, whose right arm was in a sling, while his left seemed to be handing him a slice of pepperoni pizza with melted marshmallows.

"Mikey… aw, why do I feel so *heavy* ? What's goin' on?"

Mikey laughed. "Yeah—Donnie mentioned you might feel like that. He says it'll wear off an hour or so after ya wake up. How ya doin'?"

Raph took the pizza after several efforts at lifting his hand. "Man—I've never been so hungry in my *life* . How long've I been out? What happened?" He tried looking up at his brother. "Your arm, Mikey"—and stopped. "Your arm…" He tried desperately to get up, to get away from something he hadn't been aware was chasing him, but couldn't seem to move three muscles at a time. His body felt like each limb had been weighed down by a ton of bricks.

Mikey clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, *relax* , brother o' mine. Eat some pizza. I tripped and fell during our training skirmish and got a little bump on the noggin, nothin' serious."

Raphael fell still and silent for a moment, trying to piece together what had happened. "I'm sorry, Mikey. For… for whatever."

"Don't sweat it. You're still the coolest turtle *I* know—Nightwatcher."

Raph looked at him askance. "Hey, between me, Donnie, and Leo, I *better* be the coolest. Considerin' the others are dork and Daddy's boy." He looked at his pizza and rolled it into a wheel, crust-first, not entirely sure why it appealed to him to eat it that way. "Hey, Mikey—you should try this." His brother just laughed, and Raph gestured with the burrito. "What're we watching?"

"Deep Dish Network, dude."

They watched the young Stepford wife look-alike prance around on screen in high-heels; Raph snickered sarcastically.

"Yeah—now that's what I call a deep-dish."

Mikey nearly feel off the couch laughing, and gave Raph a badly angled high five.

"Wanna 'nother slice?" Mikey asked, and handed his brother another piece from somewhere above him; Raphael realized it was from a box balanced on the edge of his back and the couch.

"Hey," Raph muttered. "You been using my shell as a table?"

"Donnie's been putting 'em there all day. Every time I look around, there's another pizza—I think he wanted there to be a warm one when you woke up."

"Oh," Raph said. "That was nice of 'im. Why'd he do that—isn't he too busy to be hastlin' around 'cause of his little brothers?"

Mikey chuckled. "Bro, you've got no idea."

Raphael fell silent again for a moment, munching on another pizza burrito. "D'you know how the shop's doin', Mikey?"

Mikey half-smiled cheekily. "Leo's been keepin' it up at night—he had Casey take in fewer jobs 'til you're up again."

Raph blinked. "Man. I owe him big time."

"Naw, I think he likes it. Misses working with you, though."

Raphael swallowed audibly. "Yeah—I miss it too." He gestured again with his burrito. "Okay, these anchovies this lady's all nuts about are makin' me sick. Anythin' with monsters on TV?"

"Huh, just Rosie O'Donnel so far, bud. It's daytime TV right now."

Raphael laughed openly. "Hey—that was actually funny, Mikey. You grow a sense of humor while I was out?"

"Oh, listen to the funny man," Mikey scoffed, and rolled his slice into a burrito. "Pretty good. It's all the pizza-y goodness wrapped into a few bites. You should get a patent or somethin'."

"I think the Italians covered that with the calzone, little brother."

"Um, so…" Mikey started, patting his brother's shell. "What d'you remember?"

Raphael frowned and squinted. "I—I remember a blur… doin' some attack runs… trying to punch at you and this feeling like I was floatin'—then bein' really heavy. I remember seein' you fall or somethin'. I remember thinkin' I did it. And lots of nightmares… for a really long time. There was always somethin' chasing me."

Behind them, Leonardo sat silently at the kitchen table, listening to his brothers; Mikey and Raph in front of the TV, and the solitary, methodical sound of typing keys from Donnie's alcove—the sound of a brother fighting his demons.

Raphael did not stay on the couch for long; when night fell and Casey was closing the shop, he went back up to the warehouse and fell before the shell cycle, a rag in hand, and used the work to

meditate. He still couldn't quite piece together the last few days of his life—it could have been years, and he wouldn't have known it. He felt as though he'd been tumbling through a strange darkness forever—but perhaps that had started before the nightmares had. Michelangelo's forgiveness could not entirely dispel it, but could only give fire to a light that might shine into it, and help him to find a way out. He wasn't sure, however, how he would get there. Something continued to chase him, through the caverns in his shell and through electric impulses singing in his muscles, filling them with restlessness. He heard someone come up from the sewers on the other side of the warehouse.

"Hey, Leo—s'that you? I can handle it up here tonight if you want a break, bro. Really."

Another voice, however, came out of the darkness.

"It's not Leo."

"Donnie? What're you doin' up here?"

Donatello came into Raph's circle of light, a few tools in hand. "Leo's asleep. I—I thought I'd give you a hand tonight."

Raphael did not conceal his surprise. "Yeah—sure. Pull up some floor. I gotta start on that ATV in the corner tonight, from the look of these diagnostics Casey left. I'm not so familiar with those things, so I could really use ya."

Donnie nodded, watching him closely, as they crouched to examine the vehicle.

"Uh—thanks for the pizzas, by the way," Raph said, unscrewing the front panels. "I'm really not sure what happened—I've been out so many days… it musta been a real pain for you guys."

Donnie held his breath for a moment. "Look, Raph—there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about—for a while,

actually. Things haven't been so great for the last year and a half—with Leo gone, and everything—and, well, you and I are the middle brothers, and even though I'm a little older, I really don't always feel like I can be much of a guidance—like I don't necessarily have a right to, you know?"

Raph laughed a little bit dryly. "Don, what're you ramblin' about? I mean, I know you're the mad genius, but English is nice sometimes."

Donatello shook his head. " *Listen* . After we rescued him—after we defeated Winters's brothers and everything—Leo told Mikey and I that you were the Nightwatcher. And then Nightwatcher's helmet appeared in that trophy closet Master Splinter keeps, so… I just never asked you about it, because I didn't want us to get in a fight, but… I guess I'm asking— *why* ?"

Raphael had grown still at the mention of Nightwatcher, and watched Donatello speak over the ATV's paneling, his tools still.

"Why is the helmet there, or why did I decide to do it?" Raph asked, a bit emptily.

"Whatever you want to tell me," Donnie said honestly. Raphael sighed.

"I used that mask to do whatever the hell I wanted, Don. I got to let my anger guide me wherever, because all I could see up here was drug dealers and prostitutes and thugs and muggers and murderers and—and I just couldn't take it anymore. I just felt like—with Mikey off at kid's birthday parties, being all innocent, and you down here, away from everything—that you guys couldn't see what I saw—that we weren't livin' in the same city anymore. And that—that *Leo* used to see it that way too, but he'd changed, and then he left—he just abandoned me with this city up here, all alone, with the criminals. I didn't think I had any other choice."

"So—so you did it because… you were angry with Leo?" Donnie asked, blinking.

"No—maybe—more like…" Raph made a frustrated noise. "I was just so pissed off that I couldn't save them—all those people—without him. I hated feeling so helpless; being the Nightwatcher took some of that away. It let me be two people." Raph picked up his wrench resignedly. "And I think you know why I had to put it to bed. That kind of freedom isn't real. I almost killed my brother—and *that* was real."

Donnie stared at him, a struggle on his face. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

Raphael scoffed a little. "You do, huh? Face it, Don—you've always had a good lid on it. That's why Leo trusts you so much."

Donatello reached over and took the wrench away from him, choking on his own words and a massive torture going on behind his eyes.

"Raph… I've—I was—you were out so long because I was *experimenting* on you."

Raphael blinked. "What the— *Huh* ?"

Donnie reached into his shell and brought out one of the empty tranquilizer darts. "I thought you went berserker on Mikey and that… maybe there was something—you know—screwy with your brain. I just wanted to be able to *fix* it—then you being Nightwatcher wouldn't matter so much. It wouldn't have been something you *chose* ."

Raphael stared, speechless.

" *Well* ?" Donnie said after a moment, frustrated.

"Well… usually you know what you're doin' when it comes to stuff like that, Donnie, so… I mean, I feel fine. I don't know what you want me to say. I don't even know what you did."

Donnie took a breath. "I injected you with a series of different brain chemicals, then with depressants, which subsequently almost

stopped your heart, so I had to inject you with adrenaline and thus start the whole process over again with a different mixture, which caused you to wake up with such serious disorientation and temporary amnesia that you acted like you were five again; you also had two minor seizures and a series of night terrors before Leo forbid me from any more experimenting—so I snuck in and gave you another injection anyways because I really thought if you kept producing adrenaline you'd be a danger; *that* made you sleep walk and"—

"Nearly throw myself in front of the subway," Raph finished for him, staring. " I think I remember some of that." He sighed. "Look—this all happened because I wasn't handlin' myself right and I lost control. I should've… I don't know, asked for help, instead of gettin' all insomniac."

Donnie threw the rag he was using to clean the ATV's engine of grease against the wall. "You're not *hearing* me, Raph! I messed up! I nearly killed you!"

Raphael stood up to match him. "Whaddaya want me to do about it, Don?" he said, raising his voice.

" *Get mad* ! That's what you do—that's my brother, that's the Nightwatcher, the vigilante—that's who you are! *I nearly killed you!* "

They stood glaring at each other over the ATV, both breathing hard; Raphael, however, at last closed his eyes. "You may not know this road, but I been down it enough times, Donnie, and it's gettin' a little old. Sit down. I don't care what you did, and if the others are mad at ya, you gotta talk to *them* . For my part, I spent a year lettin' you and Mikey support us while I was out tryin' to save the world and puttin' us all in danger—so after we repair this ATV, why don't we just call it even?" Raphael crouched back before the vehicle, and continued work, leaving Donatello standing on the other side, empty, foolish, and unsatisfied.

Surprisingly, after a few very long and tense minutes, Donatello laughed. "Okay—what multiversal dimension are you from and where's my brother Raphael?"

Raph smiled at him. "Maybe it's from clippin' coupons."

Donnie smiled, and sat back down before the ATV. He made himself sound mockingly choked up. "My little brother Raphi. All grown up."

Raphael grabbed his wrench back and used it to gesture. "Hey—I'm, like, two seconds younger than you, Don. Let's not go all crazy with it."

"So—no symptoms? No experimental hangover?" Donnie asked, tentatively.

"Nothin' right now—'cept I've never had to take a piss so often in my entire life. Seems like every five minutes"—

Donnie held up a hand. "Raph, I care greatly about your well-being, but… too much information." Raphael chuckled darkly.

"I don't even wanna know about that hole in the back of my head."

"Yeah—neither did Leo."

They snickered while they worked, in a circle of light, covered in axle grease and throwing tools at one another, safe from the demons at the fringes of the darkness.

The True Path is Bevelled with Demons

The next morning after a group breakfast and some short training, after Mikey had left for a gig in the back of the van and Donnie had taken up the hotline, Raphael stood just outside the door to the practice room, doing his best to build up resolve. He could hear Leo alone inside, going through *gokyo* with his ninjaken meditatively, as he sometimes would in the aikido fashion without blades. Raph took a deep breath and stepped around the door, onto the mats.

Leonardo detected his brother standing plainly at the edge of his sight, shuffling his feet in the doorway; he could feel Raph's nervousness, but continued until the last sweeping movement, using it to sheath his weapons cleanly, before facing him.

"What's up, Raph? Feeling better?"

Raphael looked around for something to distract him from his older brother's piercing eyes, that examined him just as Master Splinter always had growing up—precisely because they were the eyes of a *master* , that part of his sibling he couldn't have access to or understand.

"Yeah—just fine, actually. Back of my head's kinda sore—I'm a little afraid a' askin' Don 'bout that."

Leo smiled. "Yeah—just don't. Trust me on this one. Did you need something?"

Raphael took another deep breath and matched his brother's eyes. "Yeah… actually. And… you know—I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell the guys I came to ask you 'bout this—I gotta reputation, after all." He closed the door behind him—then stepped forward and knelt, bowing low in the Japanese fashion as an apprentice does to master, as respectfully as he knew how from watching his brothers and his sensei. "I—I came to ask if you'd train with me. To help me

find my anger and help me control it—'cause I've already failed tryin' to do it on my own."

Leonardo hadn't been able to stop his eyes from widening in shock when Raphael bowed; as his little brother spoke, however, a smile had found him. He let there be a moment of meditative silence after the request. Leo then knelt down, and took his brother out of the bow informally, so they sat facing one another, equals.

"It would be an honor, little brother. But let me tell you honestly, I think you just got yourself halfway there without noticing." He squeezed Raph's shoulder. "And I won't tell the guys. We'll make sure they keep thinking you're the same jerky, tough, angry maniac you've always been."

Raph smiled. "Thanks, bro."

Leo stood, helped him up, and started leading him from the room. "We're gonna need different surroundings. I want you to first take me to the place where Nightwatcher was born, and show me what you saw."

The brothers sat on a rooftop in Harlem, crouching between a storage shed and the edge wall, surveying the street below and surrounded by the Manhattan skyline. Drug dealers and pimps paced the filthy sidewalks; women in high skirts walked in twos and threes and hailed cars; groups of youths and the elderly slept or hid in the alleys or at building edges, drinking from paper bags; dirty children ran between the detritus, doing errands for gang members and dealers; the runaways, the punks, the crackheads and tweakers, lay in the cracks, some drooling, some hungry, some glaring. Raphael watched, looking empty.

"It was worse, a year and a half ago, when I decided to become the Nightwatcher; for a while I had them scared, and this place got pretty quiet. I even saw some mothers with their kids in the park a coupla days—no razor blades or syringes in the sandbox, no drive-bys, no

dealers tryin' to sell to the kids—but it's been a month now, and no Nightwatcher. They come scurryin' out again, like cockroaches."

Leonardo was watching him now.

"It's still morning. Back to the sewers, before we're seen."

When they stood opposite each other in a sewer cavern, Leonardo faced him.

"So—now that you've stood there, in that same place again, do you feel like you fixed anything?" His voice was not accusatory, but gentle.

Raphael laughed, frustrated. "It's like—chopping at water with an axe. I don't know. It felt good every time I saved someone. I'm sure it makes a difference to them… but then there's always someone else, and some other crime, and all those kids out there who're gonna grow up to do the same damn thing, and I'm savin' 'em today so I can beat the crap out of 'em tomorrow… it's just"—

"Overwhelming?" Leonardo spoke for him, as though he'd read his mind. "Water's actually a good example. You stand outside a body of water and throw a stone in—what happens?"

Raphael frowned but answered. "It falls in and there're—I don't know—ripples and stuff."

"Exactly. You throw all your energy into it, and the water just absorbs it—you see an effect for a little while, but in the end, nothing changes. You shoulder the responsibilities of the world, little brother—and eventually it'll swallow you whole, and you'll disappear. It'll wear you out and destroy you. So when you look at Harlem, and you think all that crime and suffering is overwhelming—that's because *it is* . There's nothing you or I or anyone else can do to make people stop hurting and killing each other, especially when we hardly have control of ourselves."

Raphael fell silent, and went from looking at his brother to staring at the sewer floor. "What about those people I saved? Doesn't that matter at all?"

"I'm sure they're thankful to you; and it's great they're alive if you saved them. But I'm not talking about what it does to them; I'm talking about what it does *to you* . Getting more and more angry—and becoming more and more part of the violence you're trying to save people from—and someday, who would be there to save them from you?"

Raphael would have denied such a thing, had not a vision of snapping his brother's swords off at the hilt, and pinning him to the ground, helpless, flared up before his eyes. Leonardo seemed to see it, but didn't speak of it.

"It's a never-ending cycle, Raphael. You're angry because you see people getting hurt"—

"So I tried to save them," Raph said, only half in protest, and half in realization.

"And then you feel more anger"—

Raphael swallowed, his voice almost inaudible. "Because I can't."

Leo sighed and nodded. "Because you can't." He took his sheathed swords and placed them in the corner, then resumed his spot, gesturing for his brother to do the same. Raphael did so somewhat reluctantly.

"What if we're attacked?"

"Then they'll be close by. This is important," Leo assured. "Now—come at me."

Raph scratched his head. "Uh—didn't we already do this?"

"D'you trust me, little brother?"

Raphael didn't answer; he threw a punch, which Leonardo blocked deftly; a kick, and the same; a flip, a fast rabbit punch, whirling around his elder brother like an electron around the larger nucleus, deflected, almost electromagnetically, every time. Leo never fought back—merely held up his hands or legs to turn Raph away, taking his energy and throwing it back to send him spinning, or reeling, or flat on his face, or into a wall, with small, nimble movements.

"This is Aikido, little brother, the art of matching spirits," Leo said, almost sadly, sending Raphael sprawling. "Sword arts without swords, power without force. And now you're tired, and bruised, while I—like the world—can just keep smacking you down until you've been ground to dust."

Raph struggled to his feet, out of breath. "Man—you're not serious, right? You're tellin' me you never did what I did—you never thought you could make a difference, if you just worked hard enough and long enough at it?"

Leo smiled compassionately. "I'm telling you *because* I felt that way, and because I sometimes still do. When I was"—he sighed, paused for a moment as though considering his brother, then continued. "When I was traveling through Central America, I stopped in an area of small villages and jungle, where a band of militant thugs was collecting protection money from the people, who were poor enough as it was. I set myself up as a protective spirit, and took them out—one by one. But they always came back. It was a losing battle, Raph—all it made of me was a ghost."

Raphael stood in silence, appearing somehow moved.

"And when I came back, I saw the Nightwatcher, some spirit of justice haunting the city at night—and that's when I knew I could never be the trained master our father sent me away to become, until I fought and defeated that part of me who was the crime-fighter, the spirit of the jungle—the ghost. The part of me that wanted to be vigilante." Leonardo took a shuddering breath.

"It was a mistake to chase you. It was a mistake to fight you thinking I was superior in any way. Just because you weren't traveling around the world didn't mean you weren't struggling, or training, or trying to keep even with me. And everything I went around the globe to find—all my answers, the key to mastery—it was right here, with someone who I've known my entire life. It's what happens, when you see yourself in a distorted mirror. *You* taught me the way to mastery, Raphael. I only hope to do the same for you someday."

Raphael blinked, then turned away—but not before his brother could glimpse the tears in his eyes.

"I—I turn into some kind of… *monster* , and that's supposed to be a good thing? I almost…" he paused, realizing he was echoing Donatello. "I almost killed you."

"But you didn't, Raph. You used—amazingly— *physics* to disarm me the way only your particular weapons could, and defeated me. If I hadn't wanted to take that risk, I could have walked away. That's not the choice I made, though. I chose to pursue you, to fight you. A large part of me *wanted* to fight you. You're an annoying little rebel and you've always done as you pleased—I wanted to put you in your place and shut you the hell up." Here Raphael laughed, and Leo smiled. "But your place is beside me—not under my feet."

"So—what does that mean? Master Splinter sent you away to train us both to become masters?" Raph asked, looking as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Leo laughed. "Who knows? We've always been up in each other's business—maybe time apart was the only way to grow. The only thing I can tell you for sure is that if you want to make a difference—up there"—he pointed to a grating leading up to Harlem above—"you can't just throw energy into the pool. You have to stand in the middle of a moving stream, like a big rock, and wait for the force to come to you. After a while you begin catching things—you make the stream bigger, changing the direction of its flow, without exerting any energy at all. You save people as they come to you, like April and Casey,

instead of going out and looking for them. That kind of change lasts, little brother."

"I thought even big stones wear away in the middle of a stream," Raph said, folding his arms.

Leo smiled lightly. "Not necessarily. Just… polish away the rough edges."

Raphael smiled, and Leo gestured again.

"Now—come at me. And this time, don't be angry with yourself."

They smiled, friendly rivals running on parallel streams, alternately attacking and defending, matching each other's moves and lightly taunting, honing and polishing one another—water on stones in the darkness, through bars of daylight filtering in from the grating, where the violent world moved and roared. Fighting each other's demons, side by side, in the rough, shadowy edges, where vigilantes and ghosts crouch, watching from the in-between.

The Ding Dong Ditch of Death

Mikey at last returned from his gig looking full of pizza and candy, took a look around the den, and came over to the kitchen table, where Donnie was sat, staring listlessly at the wood and pizza boxes. He fell into a chair, watching his brother for a few minutes, without response.

"Donnie? Oh, Donnieeeee… wakey, wakey! It's your favorite little brother Mikey!"

Donnie received him with a scholarly blink. "And what, pray-tell Michelangelo, makes you think Raph isn't my favorite little brother?"

" *Well* , I guess I really don't know, except that he used to flush your head down the toilet when we were nine so you snuck ginger root into his food until he had to pee every three minutes, and *then* when we were around ten he sabotaged the radio you were making so that it electrocuted you when ya turned it on, so *you* got even sticking laxatives or something into his breakfast cereal, and then Master Splinter whacked you both so hard over the head you went unconscious"—

Donatello stopped him, laughing. "Alright, alright, Mikey—you're my favorite. Does that make me your favorite older brother?"

Mikey thought for a moment. "I dunno—Raph's the *Nightwatcher* . That's pretty cool."

Donnie sighed. "What did I tell you, Mikey? People like that aren't heroes. Okay, so we know for sure *Raph* had good intentions and stuff, but it could've easily been any nut-job running around up there and swinging chains at people like a madman, and using the cover of a vigilante to rob places. You just never know."

Michelangelo shook his head. "Couldn't people, like, say the same thing about us, Don? I mean, just 'cause there's *four* of us saving a place from getting robbed instead of *one* doesn't mean we're not doing the same thing he was."

Donnie looked around for some example or distraction, but came up empty-handed. "Mikey… it's different because we balance each other out and keep each other accountable. And usually we don't go out looking for that stuff like it's our responsibility. The people of New York only gave that kind of power to the police, and they have policies and laws and other officers regulating what they do. A vigilante running around doesn't answer to checks and balances. Understand?"

Mikey shook his head. "You're too much, Don. Did you ever give Raph that lecture?"

"That's Leo's job. It's bad enough he left me to deal with Raphael for all that time, but now…" he bit back his words, a struggle going on behind his eyes.

Mikey tried making a funny face, but failed to get a smile out of Donnie. "Um… wanna order pizza?"

"Aren't you tired of pizza yet? You've been eating them all day, Mikey." Donnie played with an old motherboard for a bit. "I sure wish I knew where those two went. They're not supposed to be in the shop right now."

"Maybe they're at April and Casey's," Mikey suggested, very helpfully. "Or gettin' pizza. Don't worry, bro—Leo's with Raph, so they can't possibly get in trouble. Probably selling girl scout cookies."

Donnie sighed. "Or back to fighting again. That's the last thing we need; the only other time I remember Splinter being gone, their bickering got Raph thrown through a sky-light and unconscious for a week. Not to mention his shell." He left that marring unmentioned—

the one disfiguration that set his brother out from the rest of them: the spider web, the deep gashes.

Mikey sat peacefully, and took up his Game Guy. "Uh, bro, just 'cause you're fightin' with Leo doesn't mean the rest of us are."

Donnie put down the motherboard hurriedly. "I am *not* fighting with him! Raphael's fine, and I have no reason to be upset with Leo."

Mikey chuckled. "You're *so* fighting with Leo, dude. Just 'cause no one gets thrown through a sky-light doesn't mean it's not a fight. That's just Raph's style and that's normally the way we do it, 'cause… well, usually *Raph* 's the one fighting with people."

Donnie sat back. "What—you're never mad because Leo left? You're never mad that Raph was gone all the time? None of it bothers you?"

"It *bothered* me. But they're here now. I wasn't mad, though. I'm used to you guys doin' your own thing and leavin' me out—so I got *my* own thing, too. I'm cool with that, s'long as we're doin' *our* thing once in a while too, y'know?"

"Well," Donnie started, "no matter what, you're still the youngest. There's always going to be someone older around who's being responsible. I guess I have to envy you for that, Mikey."

Mikey flexed. "It's all part of bein' perfect, brother o' mine. And don't knock it—you guys need someone around tellin' you not to be space cadets." He opened a bag of Doritos and another of pork rinds. "Help me with these, bro?"

Donnie smiled. "Well—I guess I should say thanks for keeping the peace back there, Mikey. Even though I should also be pissed at you for interfering." He watched Mikey for a moment. "Are you mad at all about what happened?"

"What, you mean making Raph five again and everything? I think you shoulda stopped before the sleepwalking thing, yeah. But I wasn't awake for a lot of what happened, really. I probably woulda told ya to stop earlier—even if I *am* the little brother. That kinda stuff just isn't cool, Don."

Donatello's eyes flickered around, somewhat guiltily. He couldn't believe he was being lectured by Mikey—little, naïve, fun-loving, carefree Mikey—his baby brother—of all people. He almost opened his mouth to inquire further, but the sound of the den opening silenced him, as Raph and Leo walked in—both looking exhausted.

"Whoa, what happened to you, dudes?" Mikey asked.

"Where've you guys been all day?" Donnie asked.

"Training," Raph and Leo answered, simultaneously. Mikey shrugged.

"Well, they agree on somethin'. It's safe to assume they weren't fighting."

"Uh, news flash, guys—when Leo and I fight, only *one* of us disappears. The other gets to stew," Raph said, sounding normal again. He and Leo slapped a small, secretive high-five.

"O-kay, that was different," Donnie said, returning quietly to his motherboard. Raph came over and pumped his shell heartily.

"Hey, whaddya two say to Chinese tonight, huh? Somethin' different," he said, picking up the notebook.

"Alright! Put me down for thirty fortune cookies, dude!" Mikey said exuberantly. Leo walked into the kitchen and rifled around for a Coke.

" *Real* food, Mikey—then thirty fortune cookies," he said, with the matter-of-factness of the eldest. "We'll have to send you up top in

your Cowabunga Carl outfit to pick it up—just say it's for a birthday party. They'll never get it through the grating we use for pizza."

"And no holographics, Don. Sorry to disappoint ya," Raph snickered, making Leonardo frown; he hadn't been aware they would be on speaking terms.

Donnie folded his arms. "Oh, it's okay. I invented the head, too. I take no responsibility for what Mikey did to the van, though."

Raph scoffed. "Yeah—that paint job was a regular Sistine Chapel, Mikey."

Both Leonardo and Donatello roared at this joke; Mikey, however, did not.

"The what?"

"Michelangelo, you don't know your own namesake's masterpieces? When you can remember every cheat code for 452 games?" Leo admonished, smiling.

Mikey laughed. "No. The world's lucky if I pick up a magazine, dude. Hey, Raph—put me down for orange chicken and some feet of Sum-Yung-Guy."

Leo clunked him over the head with his Coke, just as Raph did the same with the notebook and Donnie hit him with the motherboard—concussion notwithstanding.

Raphael placed the order, helped Mikey into costume then accompanied him to watch from the sewer in case anything happened. When the little brothers were gone, the den grew very, very silent. Leonardo found himself looking at the detritus from the last week—the pizza boxes, the pages of equations still peeking out from strange places, the heart monitor in a corner, still not dismantled, the vague smell of various chemicals he thought he'd be

used to by now, after the hours of misery without sleep and without rest—the smell of worry, the Ding-Dong-Ditch of Death.

He found himself, once aware of his body again, standing, Coke still in hand, and Donatello sitting, staring at the motherboard in his hands quietly.

"Is this how it's gonna be, Leo? Until I can somehow show you I've learned my lesson?" Donnie asked, not looking up.

Leo brushed a hand up over his eyes. "I don't know, Donnie. I don't have an answer for this—I can't tell you when I'll be over what happened, or if things will even go back to normal. I guess we just both have to deal with it. That's all."

Donnie took a deep breath. "R-Raph said… you used to trust me—more than him."

"I did," Leo said simply, then put his Coke down with a bang. "And that's another thing—just because Raph doesn't remember and he's okay now doesn't make it alright! Understood?"

Donnie nodded. "I understand, I just—what can I say? He refused to be angry, even when I told him. He was so… big about it. I know he wouldn't have been if he remembered, but even goading him didn't make him mad. He just said we were even."

"For what? What could that possibly be even to?" Leo asked, skeptically and somewhat belligerent-sounding without meaning to be.

"Look, Leo—you don't know how things were when you were gone! I can't tell Raph what to do, I can't help him, I can't advise him, and Splinter doesn't back me up when I try."

"That's because you still act like a pushover, Don," Leo said, somewhat more gently. "If he thinks you won't stand up for yourself, he'll walk away and he won't listen. He's different from Mikey."

"Yeah, thanks, I'm very well aware of that," Donatello snapped. "I was stuck with them both for eighteen months, you know. Having to confront Raphael at every turn, trying to make him accountable and get him to help me make ends meet around here and wondering where even the odd twenty he threw at me came from—not knowing if he was finding it or robbing banks or mugging people or *what* — and the way he disappeared, Leo. For *days* sometimes. Then he'd show up, no explanation, crash, and leave again—without a word unless I got in his face. Master Splinter seemed like he just gave up on him… like he was waiting for something. Probably for you. And the way Raph would punch the wall, make his knuckles bleed, if I'd catch him without him knowing—checking the mail, and finding nothing. I've seen him almost break his own fist, Leo. What am I supposed to do about that? How can I make my own brother stop hurting? It's all so useless, all this knowledge I've got, all these things I can do and fix, and against that—it's just worthless. I had to stand around and suspect the worst and watch him destroy himself."

Leonardo had stood so only his side was visible through this, unable to look at his brother's down-turned, world-weary face as he spoke. He felt an inner battle between anger for how Donatello had handled his demons and the reasons for them in the first place—knowing both of his brothers' reasons for being the way they were, for suffering the way they did, and both of those linking directly back to himself and his own decisions, caused a singular, sad ache down in his shell.

"You could have asked him what you really wanted to know, instead of just insinuating. Raphael lashes out because he truly has trouble controlling his anger—if you do the same thing you might as well be throwing one flamethrower at another. You have so much patience in you, Don—you have so many ways of framing the things you say and calming people down. Raph doesn't have that. That's how you can be strong and break down his walls where they're weakest. You shouldn't need me around to figure out what's wrong with your own brother—my being here doesn't make you any less who you are to each other. And if that's the case, maybe it's a good thing I left."

Donatello stood up and forced Leo around to look at him. "Well, a letter once in a while wouldn't have hurt either, Leo! Not knowing what had happened to you or where you were—whether or not you were dead—put a massive strain on all of us—and there were nights we thought the same of Raphael, like he was trying to follow you and didn't know how or why… Whatever you were doing out there, it better have been worth putting us through all that and never receiving so much as an apology! Raphael showcased it for us, like he took all the pain of this family and threw at the dregs of the criminal world, and still you don't get it. What you did wasn't okay, either, Leo. It's hard to be lectured by you about how to deal with this family after you left me to do it for all that time while *you* vanished."

Leonardo remained silent for a good while, staring at the corner of the kitchen, where the frosting had once been, and Donatello finally sighed and sat down, back where they had started.

"I was just… trying to do what I thought was right," Leo whispered, not in an explanatory voice, but merely as a statement.

"Yeah," said Donnie, listlessly, his head leaning against a fist. "Apparently so was Raphael."

The door from the sewer opened up just as Donnie said "Raphael," as though on cue, and the younger brothers came in, carrying several bags of—what must have been—the greasiest Chinese food in Manhattan. Mikey also sported a bag with a gratuitous number of fortune cookies.

"How'd you get them to give you *thirty* of those, Mikey?" Donatello asked, trying to wipe his previous expression off his face. Leo sat down, quietly.

"His boyish good looks, how else?" Raphael answered sarcastically, putting the bags down and giving Mikey a noogie.

"Made Raph threaten them with the curse of the turtle demon," Mikey responded in kind, then switched to a mock-Confucian voice.

"Ancient ninja wisdom: when needing treats, always bring big brother to tear down all obstacles."

As though to emphasize this, Raph spun one of his sais before placing it back into his belt.

Donnie and Leo found themselves laughing; if they accidentally looked at each other, they were quick to look away before Raph or Mikey could see the dangerous looks passing between them over the fried rice. Raphael chuckled, puzzling over some chopsticks.

"I don't know if it's really possible to use these with three huge fingers, ya know? Now I remember why we don't order this stuff too often. Luckily, we got some finger food," he said, opening the box of egg rolls and offering them to Leo.

" *I* didn't know it was possible to find a class of food worse for us than pizza. But you found it, Raph," Leo said, accepting two quite happily. "This stuff actually turned the bag transparent. I've never seen Asian cuisine *do* that."

Raph gestured with an egg roll. "You should feel lucky we don't live in Philly. Nothin' but cheese steaks then; you'd be hatin' life, Leo."

"Or Chicago—we could have those awesome hot dogs, dude—with celery salt and peppers and onions and those sesame seed buns…" Mikey said, drifting off dreamily.

"Where d'you two *get* this stuff?" Donnie asked them, also struggling with the chopsticks and even more so with some oily noodles.

"Food network," Mikey and Raph answered simultaneously, thinking he was referring to their discussion of food from other metropolitan centers.

"I meant *this* delicious but MSG-ridden crap," Donnie retorted concisely.

"Magic Wok, up in Harlem," Raph answered. "Saved their cashier girl from an armed robbery last year. Been eatin' there ever since—get a killer discount."

Leo and Donnie cringed.

"I bet you do," Donnie said, slowly and noncommittally.

Mikey went to work on another fortune cookie. "We should have Raph 'protect' *all* the delivery joints around here. Bye-bye, coupons! Hello, vigilante discount!"

"Michelangelo!" Leo admonished severely. "We're not having Raphael terrorize the neighborhood just so we don't have to pay full price for pizza!"

"It—it was a *joke* …" Mikey responded meekly. Raphael was silent, looking between Donnie and Leo, as both sat eating tensely.

"I know, Mikey… I'm sorry. I guess it's still just a sore topic," Leo told him gently. "And I should probably tell you to eat something other than those fortune cookies, but they're most likely the healthiest thing on the table."

Raph chuckled darkly. "Comin' from the guy who doesn't know what's even *in* that container he's eatin' from…"

Leo stopped, eyeing the square, carry-out little box. After some thought, he shrugged. "I've been to China. If you think they eat weird stuff in the restaurants, try the sewers." And continued eating.

"Damn. That trick only works on Mikey," Raph commented, while Mikey continued shoving food in his mouth, oblivious.

They finished eating, and Raph made a hasty retreat to the shop, getting away from the tension bubbling between his brothers that had some focus on himself. Mikey stayed at the table with Donnie and Leo, continuing to scarf fortunes. Leonardo watched the pile of

little scraps with one-liners appearing in the center, and read them casually.

"'You are headed for a land of sunshine and relaxation'," he read. "Doubtful."

Donnie picked one up. "'You will find good fortune with a new business partner'. Don't have an old one."

"Hey, we're business partners," Mikey protested, his mouth full of cookie. "I'm your eyes and ears, remember?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Leo said, distractedly, as he picked up another fortune. He didn't read this one out loud.

Abruptly Donatello stood and left the den, walking out into the sewers on his own; neither Leo or Mikey knew if he went for a walk or up to help Raphael in the shop.

"So… they fought a lot, while I was gone?" Leo asked, his voice low and contemplative.

Mikey had run out of fortune cookies and now started on the mysterious box of food Donnie had left. "Uh… not so much like the way you and Raph fight. They couldn't talk to each other without saying somethin' wrong, so eventually they pretty much stopped. That's if Raph was even here, y'know? I heard Don talking on the phone with him a few times, before Raph just stopped answering it altogether. It was after Raph had left and been gone a coupla days already, and wouldn't tell Donnie where he was. He was yelling at him pretty loud." Mikey looked around a bit, looking very serious. "Donnie was really worried about him. More than he could tell him."

"Were you?" Leo pressed.

Mikey shrugged. "I made myself stop—figured if he didn't care we were worried, there was no reason to lose sleep over him. But Don couldn't stop. They drove each other crazy, dude."

Leonardo nodded, staring at the fortune in his hand. "'Even the longest journey must start with a single step'," he quoted, almost to the space within his shell, in a voice barely audible.

"Huh?" Mikey asked, but received no answer.

When Donatello returned he found Mikey in front of the TV and an otherwise stillness that told him Leo had left to help Raph in the shop; he sighed and slunk into his dark alcove, illuminated only by the surveillance monitors and various lights from his gadgetry. On his keyboard, however, radiant white from the eerie screen glows, was a small, slightly bent slip of paper.

In red writing on the front was printed: "You have been missing someone very dear to you. Wait patiently for their return."

Donatello stared at the little fortune, puzzling over the number of meanings it carried, the number of them who had held it that evening, and the number of reasons someone may have put it there. He was missing Splinter—he knew that for certain. He missed Michelangelo sometimes, when he noticed his brother losing his carefree attitude to the pressures of working, or to the infighting between his brothers that had taken such a serious turn over the last two years. He missed Raphael—missed them both being the middle brothers, without that bad cop aftertaste of the time when Leo was gone, when Donnie had to be the hard-ass. He missed playing pizza football and making gadgets without that lingering doubt in the back of his mind, and the terrible knowledge of who his brother had been and what he had done. He missed Leonardo. Even though he had returned, things were not what they had been. He missed his own innocence, having never had to be the big brother. He missed not knowing what it was to feel the world crashing down on your shoulders when a brother is missing; when a brother is destroying himself; when a brother is dying. But perhaps he just missed not knowing he was growing up.

Donatello, on a feeling, turned the little slip of paper over, and found words written on the other side. They were not his lucky numbers,

but in Leonardo's hand:

" *I'm sorry.* "

Donatello sat down heavily, staring into the darkness for a very long time—the monitors, the cold, eerie, bluish, Cocytus-like glow, the broken screen, with a spider-web crack through its center, reminding him of the penalty you pay when a brother loses to his demons.

Abruptly he stood, and left the alcove. Donnie jumped over the back of the couch and landed next to Mikey, who smiled at him and handed him some popcorn in silence. He still held the little fortune in his hand; its crinkle felt like a talisman that could allow his heart to win to the feather.

Author's Note: This will be the last official chapter of this story (I think) though I will upload an epilogue. I also have serious plans in the works for a sequel (by which I mean I am currently working on it…) Please remember I am back in session at UCLA and shouldn't be doing such a thing, and your reviews and encouragement make it all that much easier. Please, read and review! Feedback is very helpful, especially as I view every work as a work in progress! This is a pretty long fanfic, and getting some feedback truly does help.

Epilogue: Ghosts in the Spider Web

Author's Note: I want to thank everyone for sticking with me up to this point and to remind you that FEEDBACK is GREATLY appreciated. Special thanks to Gadoken King for his feedback, and to Jeriminah—thanks so much; I will indeed be continuing to write in this section. The first chapter of the sequel is complete, and should be posted very soon. As a note to everyone about the Nightwatcher backstory—I did not make it up. It is from the *Raphael* movie prequel comic from the notes of and authorized by writer-director Kevin Munroe and hence by creative director Peter Laird, and part of the continuity of the 2007 TMNT film. As there are five of these prequels and I've only so far read the first two (*Raphael* and *Michelangelo*), there is a chance that after reading the others I will come back and change or add to the chapters of this story. Everything is a work in progress. I hope you've all enjoyed—see you next fic!--Aubretia Lycania

Raphael sat silently up in the warehouse, before his bike, polishing and concentrating hard on the bright shine of the silver and black that had accompanied him through the darkness. He heard someone walking silently into his circle of light, but knew it was a brother, and didn't bother turning around.

"Hey, Raph. Back to the old routine so soon, I guess," Leo's voice found him.

Raph saw him at the corner of his vision. "Yeah. Casey left me diagnostics for those two mopeds over there. Older ones, too—the kick-start dealies. Should be fun. Probably rusted all to hell, from the look of 'em."

"And with all that work ahead of us, why are you endlessly cleaning that bike of yours, little brother?"

"Can't let myself forget about it, now can I?" Raph responded, elusively. "Besides—I've been waitin' for you."

Story of my life.

Both brothers thought this, as they sat down around the first little moped and examined it for some way to get the panels off the motor without the jaws of life. Leo found himself looking back at the black motorcycle, which he knew belonged to the Nightwatcher.

"How did you get that thing, anyway? Did you build it?"

"Naw. Just repaired it." Raph let this be his answer for a few minutes, while he considered his brother. At last he continued, sensing Leo was waiting for him to do so. "I got it from an old man, who I wasn't in time to save. He didn't want anyone to know about his life, so that's my secret to live with. But I made him two promises—and I kept them both. I kept on keepin' them. I think now he's finally been put to rest."

Raphael could sense a pressure and warmth behind his eyes, and avoided his brother's face; he felt Leonardo's hand on his shoulder, however.

"How did he die?"

"D'you—you remember, right before you left, when I disappeared and you called me, and I wouldn't tell you where I was? And there was a gunshot behind me, just before I hung up? That was Nightwatcher being born—or I should say, becoming a ghost." Raph took a shuddering breath; he couldn't believe he was at last illuminating his brother on the context of their last conversation before Leo's pilgrimage, and before his own descent. "Some punks shot him. No good reason, other than to steal a TV and a coupla bucks. This guy knew about ninjitsu, and he'd read more books than I've ever even *seen* . He had a family, who he didn't want to know about his life. So he hid it with me. I still don't know why… he wasn't afraid of me, or even surprised. He acted like I was just a normal

teenager, like himself when he was my age. He wasn't scared of sticking up for himself or for his neighborhood… I didn't know people like him really existed, unless they were nuts. And then he just *died* … for no good reason… 'cause of a bunch of punks. Shot through the heart."

Leonardo watched him for a long while, and put down the screwdriver he was holding.

"Raph… I want to ask you a question, but I need you to promise me that you'll tell me the truth, no matter what it is. Can you do that?"

Raph considered him again. "Unless it's somethin' I promised I'd keep secret, then yeah, I guess so."

Leo took a long, deep breath. "While I was away—when you were Nightwatcher… did you ever kill anyone?"

Raphael had gone perfectly still; he put the grease rag he was holding down slowly, looking his brother right in the eye. His voice came out cold and steady.

"Yes."

They sat silently watching one another for a long time, this simple and terrible answer between them, somehow holding them close together yet frozen in time. Leo at last let out his breath, only then realizing he'd been holding it, and nodded.

"When you were in Central America, protectin' those villagers—did you?" Raphael asked in kind.

Leo swallowed hard.

"Yes. I did."

Raphael nodded, and did not comment further. They remained tied together by that thread in the pool of light, yet no longer still; both could feel it, the tugging of that spider's web upon which they both

must lay, making of them wooden marionettes to one another's actions—tugged this way and that, hand-cuffed to strange semblances. They took up their tools and resumed working, stuck together through truth that did everything save set a body free. Leonardo found he was glad to share the burden, even though he gained one in return; he found Raphael looking at him, a kind of relief etched into his features—gratitude, too, for being brave enough to ask the honest question.

The blood was invisible on his red ninja mask, the blood of the punk with the gun in his hand, whom he'd slashed, drunkenly, as the fulfillment of a deathbed promise taken a step too far. The ghost settled, tamed between the two of them, between their identical eyes, trapped in the spider's web.

Leonardo supposed this was the life's blood of brotherhood: this lifelong sharing of the dark, as well as happiness. Never were they closer than in the shadows; never were they more one than in the face of evil; never did he more understand his brother than through reflecting sins. Never did he need his brother more than through the confession, than through the acceptance of equality, of being cogs in the same wheel that made their family run. As they got the paneling off the motor successfully, Leo felt Raph briefly grip his hand, before they tucked the matter away. Closeness in the spider web.

End